

# CIA Chief Warns of 'Coups Plotting' in Latin America

By JACK NELSON, *Times Washington Bureau Chief*

WASHINGTON—CIA Director William H. Webster warned Wednesday of increasing unrest and "coup plotting" in Latin American countries and declared that a bipartisan policy must be developed to support covert action in the region.

Some of the democracies in the region are so fragile, he told *The Times*, that their survival depends "upon the attitude of their military and the capacity of their military to maintain law and order."

Webster expressed particular concern about unrest in Mexico where the new government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari faces increasingly severe economic problems, labor strikes and protests as well as widespread official corruption in narcotics trafficking.

"I know that the Administration would like to give Salinas all the support that it can and help them through their debt problem so that it would become one of the anchors in a good, sound Latin American policy," Webster declared. "But it's like every other place down there, it is fragile."

In his foreign policy, President Bush can be expected to give high priority to Latin America because "he has to do that," said Webster, predicting that Mexico "will be given far more attention than it has been in the past."

In a breakfast interview with reporters and editors of *The Times*' Washington Bureau, Webster also

stated that in El Salvador and many other Latin American countries, there is so much unrest it is difficult to predict what will happen and that this is one of the biggest problems facing Secretary of State James A. Baker III.

"There's no question [about] the problems in Nicaragua, concurrent problems in Honduras and because of the Nicaraguan problem, Panama, Haiti. . . . You can just go down the list and go into South

America and see other similar signs of coup plotting," he said. "There is no easy solution, but it's not anything that is going to go away."

In Panama, Webster said, military strongman Manuel A. Noriega's "survival capacities are good" and that despite U.S. economic and political pressures designed to force him out after he was indicted in Florida on drug trafficking charges, "he's in no imminent danger unless new initiatives are developed."

The pressures on Noriega continue to be strong and he still must scramble to make his payroll and other economic responsibilities, but he has learned to live with a diminished economy, according to Webster. The CIA director noted that the United States still lacks a clearly defined policy on how to deal with Noriega.

Since such pressures have not forced his ouster, Webster said, it is up to President Bush to consider whether to try to increase the pressures or turn to "alternatives," which the CIA director declined to define.

On the issue of covert action, Webster did not specify what kinds of activity he had in mind or in which countries such action should be applied. But he said that as someone assigned "to come up with covert support for our foreign policy and convince the Congress that what we propose to do is good and should be done and should be funded through covert action programs. . . . I know how important it is that a bipartisan approach to these solutions be developed. We are not on our own. We have oversight committees that regulate the extent to which we can func-

tion in support of these programs." Discussing the situation in Mexico, Webster said that some people there have been encouraged by the forceful way that Salinas moved against the allegedly corrupt leadership of the oil workers union last month and then acted to prevent violence and protect oil installations after the protesting oil workers disrupted production throughout that country.

Salinas' action was seen in Mexico as a message that the new president intends to curb the power that unions traditionally have exerted, sometimes violently, in the country's economy and within its ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party.

The Salinas government also recently asked to examine information in U.S. investigative files allegedly linking some of Mexico's top law enforcement officials with narcotics trafficking, but Webster was reluctant to discuss the matter because Salinas had stipulated that he wanted no publicity.

Some U.S. officials have expressed fears that turning over information to Mexican authorities could compromise sensitive U.S. intelligence sources.

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